

# Good Samaritans

By E. WAYNE

Indian anti-trafficking heroes save a woman during their U.S. visit.



It could have been a nightmare for any visitor to a foreign country. Sitting in your hotel room late at night, you hear a cry for help. In this unfamiliar territory, is it safe to go to someone's aid? What will you face if you open the door? Fortunately, for a victim of domestic violence in Santa Fe, in the Southwestern U.S. state of New Mexico, the people who heard her screams were quite experienced in the art of rescue.

Rishi Kant and Jata Shanker—two Indian anti-trafficking activists in America as part of the International Visitor Leadership Program of the Department of State—turned a moment of fear and uncertainty into an act of heroism. On December 7, 2005, they rescued a young woman who was being assaulted and were awarded certificates of appreciation in the Santa Fe City Council chambers.

But the story began far before that fateful night in New Mexico. For Kant, it be-

gan in the early 1990s, when he was a college student working to promote AIDS education in a New Delhi brothel. Inside, a girl who had been locked up and sold into prostitution asked him to rescue her. However, while he was looking for help, the brothel owner found out about the escape plan and moved her to another location. He never saw her again. "I see her in my eyes," he says. "That folded-hand request.... It changed me. Until I die, I know I will work against trafficking." Soon after that he helped start Shakti Vahini, which has rescued thousands of women and children since 1994.

Shanker works for another nongovernmental organization, MSS Seva, in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, near the border with Nepal. The entire border region of the state is a hotbed for trafficking, especially of children, from Nepal to India. Shanker's dedication to his work is obvious. "I'm not into prevention," he says. "I

am into annihilation. I want to annihilate trafficking on the border."

Both Kant and Shanker were nominated for the Visitor Leadership Program that involved spending three weeks in the United States, learning about American activist groups, law enforcement and anti-trafficking efforts. According to the Department of State, more than 200 current and former heads of state are past participants in the Visitor Leadership Program.

After meeting government officials in Washington, D.C., grassroots volunteers in Little Rock, Arkansas, and HIV/AIDS organizations in Seattle, Washington, the two men arrived at their last stop in Santa Fe.

Kant and Shanker were sharing a hotel room and neither could sleep. So they were listening to Hindi music on a laptop and Kishore Kumar's "*Chalte Chalte*" started playing at about 2 a.m. Then they heard a scream from the parking lot, "Don't beat me. Please help me!"



Photographs by SEBASTIAN JOHN

Jata Shanker (left) and Rishi Kant, participants in the U.S. International Visitor Leadership Program, rescued a victim of domestic violence in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Below: Raye Byford, deputy chief of the Santa Fe Police Department, Kant and Shanker.

Both jumped up and rushed to the window. Through the haze of the snowfall outside, they saw a naked woman lying in the parking lot and a man beating her thighs and stomach. Kant shouted at the man and ran outside. He chased and caught him, while Shanker went to help the young woman lying in the snow. "Blood was everywhere. She was crying so much and she just clung to me," he says.

He carried her to the hotel reception desk and sat her in a chair. Shanker tried to comfort her as the terrified night clerk called the police for help. But Shanker didn't get to stay long—the assailant had

broken free of Kant's grip and was on the run again.

Both men ran after the fleeing man and kicked at his legs until he stumbled. Shanker caught him, but this time, he pulled out a knife. They also saw a pistol stuck in the waist of his pants. He kept yelling, "Don't touch me, I will kill you!" The threat of the gun, however, did not deter these two. "I've fought traffickers," says Shanker. "I don't think about the fear. If you are able to, you just do it." But the situation was about to get far worse.

While Shanker was struggling to keep hold of the man, Kant stopped a passing car for help. Unfortunately, he picked the wrong car. He asked the driver to help them because a woman was being assaulted. Far from offering help, the man started screaming at him and threatening to shoot him as well.

Kant says, "Once he opened the car window, I saw a pistol sitting on the seat. I turned back to Jata and said, 'Run!' Jata was not running, he was still trying to catch the other man, so I went to help him so we could get away from the car. Fortunately, because of the receptionist, the police arrived just then." Kant pauses for a moment, then concedes, "It is lucky that we are alive today....I am so impressed with the speed of the police response and their sensitivity toward the victim."

Raye Byford, deputy chief of the Santa Fe Police Department, told the end of the chaotic tale. "Unfortunately, the male escaped, but they were able to protect the female from further injury. I do know one of the [Indian] gentlemen was barefoot as they began the chase of the suspect male. The police department presented the

two of them with certificates of appreciation." The attacker turned out to be the victim's boyfriend, and a case of domestic violence investigation began.

Brave men like Kant and Shanker are on the front lines of the battle against human trafficking in India—a battle that has been escalating every year. The rise of female feticide has led to a skewed sex ratio across the country, causing more girls to be sold into prostitution or forced marriages. Meanwhile, demand for child labor continues in manufacturing of products as diverse as firecrackers, diamonds, carpets and saris. While there are no definite figures, there are likely millions of women and children enduring forced labor in India, not to

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mention those trafficked abroad.

However, conviction rates remain very low. According to a U.S. government monitoring report, courts in Mumbai prosecuted just 53 people for trafficking-related offenses in 2004, and convicted 11. The report states, "While this is an increase over 2003, the level of prosecution remains inadequate relative to Mumbai's role as the largest center for sex trafficking in India."

To help train law enforcement officials and improve their ability to investigate and prosecute, the U.S. government recently added \$2 million to support a joint anti-trafficking project with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Government of India. It is set to be the largest U.S. government-funded UNODC anti-trafficking project in the world. The new funding is part of nearly \$8 million committed by the United States to fight trafficking in India. □

**About the Author:** E. Wayne is a freelance writer based in New Delhi.



Courtesy JATA SHANKER